

Thumbnail Sketch of the Bowman House
April 1985, by Jean Reese

Although the Bowman House was built in 1904, its history begins, as so much of this city does, in the abandoned city Newport.

The young lawyer, Jonathan Bowman came west from his native New York to Wisconsin in 1851. In 1852, he and Joseph Bailey founded the Village of Newport on the east side of the Wisconsin River. When the town died, Bowman moved his family and his house to Kilbourn in 1862. The house was moved to 606 Broadway and now stands at 618 Cedar Street. At some time, Bowman bought block 62, where the home now stands. This corner was to have been the center of town. While the block stood vacant for many years, Jonathan Bowman became one of Kilbourn's leading citizens. His law practice was extensive. He was made president of the Bank of Kilbourn soon after its organization in 1867 and in 1868 bought the bank.

Meanwhile his political reputation spread statewide. He was elected to several terms in the Senate and Assembly of the state and lost election to the United States Senate by only one vote.

He and his wife Hannah were parents of five children; Ella D., Abram D., Asa, Jenny and Emma. Jonathan Bowman died in 1895.

In January of 1902, his son Abram married Alberta Griswold and on September 6, 1904, Abram purchased the northwest corner of block 62 from his mother.

He built the Bowman Home in 1904 and died in December, 1907 at age 46. His obituary mentions the home. Abram's widow soon sold the home to Hannah, Abram's mother Hannah, and sisters, Jenny and Emma. Hannah Bowman never lived in the home but stayed in the family home (606 Broadway) until her death. Jenny and Emma lived in the Bowman Home (714 Broadway). Jenny survived as the last member of the Bowman family, dying in February, 1934.

Jenny's will provided that Block 62 be given to the city for a park, and the house was to be the "Jonathan Bowman Home for Women". A trust fund was established to provide "accommodations for deserving women forty-five years of age and older", in other words, a free two week vacation. The home opened in the summer of 1934 and operated for 43 years through 1977. As one guest wrote; "It is indeed a rare treat to be chosen as a guest in this beautiful home overlooking the surrounding park . . . It would be impossible for eight women to live for two weeks in the harmonious companionship inspired by the home without forming friendships that would carry on. And so, Jennie Bowman, though we cannot be with you in person, we who have benefited by your generosity, salute you in grateful remembrance."

There is still some question, as to why the home ceased operations, but in 1978 it reverted to the city who tried for several years to find a municipal use for it.

In April, 1981, the city decided the only solution was to burn it. A group of interested citizens hastily formed the Dells Country Historical Society to save the building by assuming expenses and upkeep with plans of establishing a museum of local history. More artifacts are being donated and interest keeps growing. The home was open for limited weekend hours in the summer of 1984.

References: See information sent to State Historical Society for possible National Register status.